Why is Iran's birth rate plummeting?

written by Elie Klutstein | 24.11.2024

Iran is facing a severe demographic crisis as birth rates continue to plummet and its population rapidly ages, with officials warning the Islamic Republic could lose half its population by 2101. The government's attempts to reverse previous family planning policies have failed to convince Iranian women to have more children, highlighting growing tensions between state policies and social realities.

The demographic crisis facing Tehran is starkly illustrated by a billboard in a typical Iranian city. It depicts a solitary cyclist with a single child, rendered in dreary monochrome, trailing behind a vibrantly colored family of six on an oversized bicycle – father, mother, and four balloon-wielding children who appear to race past the wistful onlookers. The message, displayed in both Persian and English, proclaims: "More children, happier life." Some variations feature rowing boats instead of bicycles, but the underlying message remains unchanged.

This public messaging campaign attempts to address one of the most critical challenges confronting Iran over the past decade: a steadily declining birth rate that is rapidly approaching crisis levels. The situation has become so dire that Iran stands on the brink of negative population growth. At this point, deaths will outnumber births, gradually decreasing the country's population.

While the statistical evidence of this phenomenon requires careful interpretation – given the sometimes contradictory and inconsistent reporting by various Iranian officials – one fact remains undisputed: this represents a fundamental challenge that deeply concerns Tehran's authorities. The gravity of the situation is evident in the frequency of international media coverage of high-level discussions in Tehran, the regime leadership's repeated references to the issue, and multiple attempts to address the problem. Propaganda articles, official speeches, and statements by senior government officials consistently indicate that the situation continues to deteriorate rather than improve or stabilize.

The Iranian fertility crisis involves three interconnected trends: first, the decline in population growth approaching zero and potentially turning negative; second, a significant increase in life expectancy, mirroring global trends; and finally, most

concerning to regime leaders, Iran's rapidly aging population – meaning an increasing proportion of citizens are classified as "elderly."

Deputy Health Minister Alireza Raisi recently offered a stark forecast: by 2101, Iran's population could shrink to half its current size, with 50 percent of survivors belonging to the elderly demographic. Such a scenario, where Iran's population dwindles to just 42 million people, would fundamentally alter the nation's character.

Recent data reveals that Iran's birth surplus – the excess of births over deaths – has reached its lowest level in years. Furthermore, births in 2023 decreased by 17,000 compared to 2022, continuing a multi-year trend of declining births in the Islamic Republic.

The range of fertility rates among Iranian women varies according to different reports: some claim it remains slightly above two births per woman – the minimum required for population stability, where each pair of parents raises two children. Others cite lower figures, around 1.6 births per woman. This was apparently the rate in Tehran last year, significantly below the golden number of two children per family.

For comparison, Israel – a much smaller and more developed country than Iran – recorded a fertility rate of slightly more than three children per woman in 2022, the highest among OECD countries. That year, Israel's population grew by 1.86 percent. Iran's neighbors, Pakistan and Afghanistan, also enjoy impressive population growth. If Iran fails to reverse the trend, it will soon have the lowest birth rate in the Middle East.

According to official figures, Iran currently has approximately 89 million inhabitants. On the eve of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the population was much lower, estimated at about 37 million. At that time, Iran was far more Western-oriented, and family planning was part of normal life there.

Two parallel processes occurred after the revolution: the religious clergy who took control of Tehran encouraged childbirth, and the Iran-Iraq war sparked an unprecedented baby boom. During the 1980s, as a result, Iran's fertility rate was among the world's highest, with each average woman giving birth five or six times. The government urged citizens to produce "an army of 20 million" to fight for the Islamic Republic in Allah's name.

Growth was so rapid that the country's population nearly doubled within 15 years. At some point, Tehran's leadership realized the country lacked infrastructure to support such accelerated population growth. The war with Iraq had also left the national treasury empty, without the ability to advance extensive construction projects to meet the growing population's needs.

Therefore, in 1988, an internal reversal occurred in the Iranian approach: that year, Tehran's Supreme Court ruled that contraception and family planning were religiously permissible. The republic's leadership launched a campaign titled "fewer children, better life" and subsidized contraception, vasectomies, and more.

From then until 2010, Iranian fertility declined sharply: the average number of births per woman plunged from five or six to 1.7 or less. Over the past 15 years, the decline has moderated but remains consistent. The government campaign thus succeeded far beyond expectations, leading the country to ever-diminishing growth. Since then, the Islamic Republic's leaders have tried to encourage the population to reverse the trend and have more children, so far without success.

Among other measures, the government has launched a series of campaigns and programs to encourage childbirth. For example, the declared target for the current five-year period is to raise the birth rate per woman to 2.5. Since various measures on this issue have failed for a decade, this represents an ambitious goal. The government offers citizens various benefits for expanding their families, including extended maternity leave, grants, scholarships, low-interest loans, health insurance, housing assistance, and more. Iran has canceled subsidies for all contraceptives and offers free medical treatments to encourage fertility. This past August, for example, a new propaganda campaign was launched, offering substantial scholarships for any initiative promoting childbirth.

How much does the continued situation worry regime leaders? Here's an example: a senior imam of one southern city defined it as "more harmful to Iran than war," saying the reduction in births affects national identity, religion, economy, and all residents. The deputy health minister warned that if the situation doesn't improve soon, "we will fall into a demographic black hole, and it will take us about 150 years to compensate for it."

The highest-ranking official notable in his attention to the matter is none other than Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The man who set policy in

Tehran understood at the beginning of the last decade where the wind was blowing and came out openly against family planning policy. He called it a "hostile Western policy" designed to harm Muslim countries and called on all Iranian mothers to mobilize for the nation.

Already in 2012, Khamenei declared that expanding the Iranian family was a strategic goal and published a series of steps and programs to encourage childbirth. The target set by Khamenei, which he has repeated several times, is to increase Iran's population to 150 million people by 2050. The ability of Iran to support such a large population doesn't worry the supreme leader, nor does the welfare of ordinary citizens who would have to bear the burden of such great pressure on state resources.

The birth crisis stems from several sources. The first is a sharp rise in the marriage age in Iran, which naturally affects the age at which women give birth. Findings from recent surveys in Iran reveal that the average marriage age for women in the country has reached 24, while men marry on average at 28. Moreover, the marriage rate in the republic has dropped dramatically: in 2010, almost 900,000 couples married in the country, while this year, just under half a million couples registered for marriage. Accordingly, the average age for first births for women in urban areas of the country approaches 28, while men in Tehran have children at an average age of 34.5 – a statistic that indicates the depth of the crisis. The situation is better in villages, but even there, women only start giving birth on average at age 24 and above.

Another characteristic of the phenomenon that the government wages a war of extermination against is abortions. According to estimates, more than 300,000 abortions are performed in Iran each year, only 10 percent of which are legal, meaning they stem from health reasons. With an average of about a thousand abortions per day in the Islamic Republic, they constitute about one-third of the country's birth potential. Senior officials have defined the act as "execution" and claimed that abortions are an enemy plot against Iran.

Experts point to various reasons for the birth crisis, chief among them being the economic situation in the country, which has pushed almost a third of residents below the poverty line and sharply raised inflation. Meanwhile, exposure to Western norms through illegal technological means, along with desires for personal advancement, have changed the preferences of many in the Iranian

population, especially in less religious sectors. Bottom line, it appears that large parts of the Iranian public don't believe in the country's future, and children are not their primary life goal.

The challenge that declining births pose to Iranian authorities is particularly severe when accompanied by the aging problem. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, life expectancy in the country has risen significantly, similar to other countries worldwide. In 1979, it stood at 57, and today, Iranian women are expected to live to age 78 on average and men to 76. This means the Islamic Republic is currently dealing with a growing population defined as "elderly" or "senior citizens" – meaning older than 60. About 10 percent of Iran's population, approximately 9 million people, currently fall into this category.

The forecast for the future is even bleaker: according to estimates, by 2050, this group will grow to become about one-third of Iran's population and will be the largest of its kind in the Middle East. Of those aging citizens, by 2050, almost 4 percent of the population is expected to be older than 80. In fact, the only country in the world where this problem is more severe is South Korea, which, unlike Iran, is not dealing with a failing economy and strict international sanctions.

This crisis has broad implications: the expansion of the "dependent" group in Iran will place an additional burden in coming decades on the social and economic system in the country, on health and nursing services, and more. The government needs to redesign the pension system, which is not adapted for such a large population segment, and examine how it will be able to assist an especially large number of elderly who will need help dealing with physical and mental difficulties.

However, Iran's political and military choices have brought heavy international pressure upon it, deeply affecting its economy. The sanctions make it difficult for the government to allocate funds for such long-term programs, and studies have found they also directly affect ordinary citizens. For example, surveys conducted in Iranian households found that the sanctions particularly negatively affected the elderly population, especially those without organized pensions. Additionally, since elderly people often rely on family support, the economic damage to the entire country affects citizens' ability to help their elderly relatives.

A lot could also change around the rise of the new administration in the US. If

President-elect Donald Trump takes a hard line toward Iran and even implements a “maximum pressure” campaign against it from the start of his term “to bring it to its knees” – as already reported in American media – this will not help the regime in Tehran face such internal challenges.

Experts suggest that one way to deal with the crisis is to better utilize the existing workforce in Iran. They particularly mean the low participation rate of women in the economy, which could boost local production and help deal with aging problems in the medium term. The problem, of course, is that policies to promote women are not at the top of Iran’s priorities, and it also somewhat conflicts with the desire to encourage high fertility in a traditional society. It’s no coincidence that Iranian women interviewed by international media expressed suspicion that Tehran’s fertility encouragement policy is meant to keep women “in their proper place, at home,” in their words.

That statement reflects the general attitude of Iranian citizens toward their leadership on this issue, along with their unwillingness to obey Khamenei’s entreaties or cooperate with his plans to encourage childbirth. The supreme leader himself repeatedly declares the problem and formulates plans, grants, and additional incentives – but the people ignore him. This is further evidence of the disconnect between large parts of the Iranian population from the conservative and extreme leadership in the country and the leadership’s alienation from entire segments of the Iranian people.

Here, for example, are words that Goya, a Tehran resident, told a French media network about one of the new laws to encourage childbirth and against abortion: “It’s ridiculous, interfering in citizens’ private lives. Instead of solving economic problems, the authorities want to interfere more in our lives. It’s not their business. It’s my decision. We are used to restrictions in this country and will find a way around them.”

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Based on very initial knowledge and limited information, I would conclude the following results of Israel’s three-wave Oct. 26 strike on Iran, which were partly strategic, but mostly tactical:

1. Israel finally broke the aura of Iranian invincibility. It dispelled the 30-year obsession in the West that a strike would have apocalyptic consequences, and established precedent for hitting Iran directly. This is no small thing, and lifts an analytical and policy straight-jacket that paralyzed Israel and others for decades. Iran has been exposed as weak; its bluffs and bluster called. The emperor has only old, threadbare underwear. Not quite nude, but close.
2. Israel started normalizing striking Iran in the same way that, over the years, Israeli strikes on Syria have become routine and barely noticed.
3. Israel set itself up well for a strike that truly devastates the Iranian regime in the unlikely event that it responds.
4. Israel showed itself to be a tactical genius and a military power rivaled by none in competence—a true pride of the Jewish people.

On the negative side of the ledger, the bottom line represents a failed strategic result, for the following reasons:

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1. The United States wanted Israel to hit mostly that which is aligned with what the administration defines as U.S. priorities: anything that helps to harm Russia's war against Ukraine. Those sites were, in fact, hit.
2. Israel limited itself to those sites and the ones that Israel needs to strike in order to operate over Iran. Those sites, namely anti-aircraft, were hit.
3. Israel did *not* hit any site that hurts Iran's regime and could lead to escalation as defined by Iran's pre-strike chest-thumping: nuclear, oil, infrastructure, regime figures or symbolic targets.
4. So after a year in which Iran and its proxies killed 2,000 Israelis; destroyed up to 60% of cities in the north; sent 250,000 Israelis to be internal refugees; launched a global campaign of Nazi-level antisemitism; launched 600 missiles and drones into Israel; shut down half of Israel's ports and caused all international airlines to indefinitely stop flying to Israel; tried to kill several of the most senior Israeli officials; and sent a drone to hit the sitting prime minister's house, Israel launches a strike that protects Ukraine but leaves everything else untouched.
5. In other words, after a month of bluster that Israel will change the face of the Middle East, it appears to have returned to the Oct. 6 strategic

concept of “we showed them” and deterrence, rather than conducting a strike that shakes the foundations of the Iranian regime and maintains strategic strategic momentum. Instead, it let the United States finally achieve its goal of strategically leashing Israel and forcing it back essentially into a strategically reactive, de-escalatory posture.

6. Israel thus let Iran’s chest thumping, which was designed to panic Washington, succeed in reshaping Israel’s reaction—in essence, giving Iran control over what Israel would hit.
7. The key strategic gain Israel had in the last months was that it brought “victory” as understood in terms of regional culture and grasp— that Israel had “lost it,” was “possessed by the jinn” and the master of the house went crazy. But that concept, appropriate for the region, was traded in again for a failed Western understanding of conflict management—“Restraint is strength,” “We showed them,” “Iran got the message”—deterrence.
8. In short, Iran, whose entire strategy is based on manipulation, chess and using your soul as a weapon against you—all of which depend on your being rational, predictable and manipulatable—used the power of the U.S. as Israel’s strategic Achilles heel to transform the strategic reality of defeat, retreat and fear it faced in the last two months as Israel has become a dangerous uncontrollable and unpredictable force into a successful effort to return Israel into a controllable, reactive and manipulatable position. From there, Iran now can reassert its domination over setting the agenda; manipulate events to reverse its retreat; return the strategic momentum it had lost; and enter a long-range confrontation with Israel on its terms.
9. Regionally, Israel no longer appears to be the strong horse that can replace indispensable U.S. power, but instead has reverted to being a dependent U.S. vassal in terms of strategic behavior. Everyone knows this was not the strike Israel needed and could have executed, but that it was the strike that Washington imposed.
10. Israel’s limiting its strike undermines chances for real peace with Saudi Arabia. The Saudis were looking for a strong horse that replaces U.S. power. Instead, they see now that Israel is nothing more than an American vassal—which is useless to them.

I realize this is harsh. I realize Iran may strike back, so Israel might have a second

chance. But it’s doubtful that Iran will take the bait.

Israel’s strike is a form of strategic victory for Iran in regional terms, no matter how much our Western minds try to rationalize it as an objective show of strength. Iran will far more likely respond in ways that continue to reassert its manipulative control over events, rather than lash out in a way that allows Israel a second chance.

In conclusion, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered this strike under withering pressure from every direction inside Israel and from abroad. The leaked plans, hostile demeanor and slightly veiled threats coming from Israel’s key ally and soul-mate, the United States, were wounds that are not easily dismissed.

Israel has a small population, less than a 10th of Iran’s, while fighting an eight-front war alone and with its allies slowly choking off its arms supply. It must look over its shoulder at international institutions that are engage in lawfare to annihilate it, and is plagued by an unimaginative defense establishment that suffers deeply from the Western malady of having forgotten the meaning of victory in war.

So, Israel not only acted alone, but with a strong headwind from every direction, even that of its allies. Netanyahu’s perseverance despite these forces of sabotage will earn him a hallowed place in history. He has emerged as the only leader in power with such vision and resolve to defend Western civilization.

But a sober analysis must identify and overcome the internal forces and hopefully still deliver the strategic victory that, at this point, only Netanyahu has the talent to properly grasp and achieve.

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the potential benefits.

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written by Elie Klutstein | 24.11.2024

Israel’s actions against Hezbollah, culminating in Nasrallah’s assassination, along with the continued pounding of Hamas, have restored much of its deterrence and respect in the Middle East. Now, Israel must charge towards the next objective – eliminating Iran’s nuclear program.